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The Criminals in Virgil's Tartarus: Contemporary Allusions in *Aeneid* 6.621–4

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THE CRIMINALS IN VIRGIL'S TARTARUS: CONTEMPORARY ALLUSIONS IN *AENEID* 6.621–4

At *Aen.* 6.562–627 the Sibyl gives Aeneas a description of the criminals in Tartarus and the punishments to which they are condemned.¹ The criminals are presented to us in several groups. The first consists of mythical figures, the Titans (580–1), the sons of Aloeus (582–4), Salmoneus (585–94), Tityos (595–600) and Ixion and Pirithous (601–7). Next Virgil turns away from mythical figures to particular categories of criminal. He mentions those who hated their brothers, who assaulted a parent, who cheated a *cliens*, who gloated over wealth they had acquired without setting aside a part for their family, who were put to death for adultery, and those who, breaking their masters' ('dominorum', 613) trust, made war on their country (608–14). The reference to the contemporary scene is unmistakable. The mention of a *cliens* (609) indicates that we have moved from Greece to Rome. Moreover, 'quique ob adulterium caesi' (612) brings to mind Augustus' concern over moral standards, the subject of legislation in 28 B.C., 18 B.C. and A.D. 9; the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* (18 B.C., but no doubt in the air for some time previously) gave to fathers of adulteresses the right to put to death both guilty parties. Thirdly, 'arma...impia' (612–13) is an obvious reference to civil war (cf. *Geo.* 1.511–14; *Aen.* 1.294–6), which as Servius argues is more narrowly defined by 'nec veriti dominorum fallere dextras' (613) so as to exclude Caesar and Octavian: undoubtedly the allusion is to the war against Sextus Pompeius, which Augustan propaganda chose to represent as a war against runaway slaves.² Virgil continues by sketching the penalties paid in Tartarus by such men (614–17). While doing so, however, he retreats once again into the realm of mythology: the punishments he describes are those more normally associated with Sisyphus and Ixion (rolling a stone uphill, suspension on a wheel). This reversion is completed at 617–20 where, confusingly, Virgil denies that he has been alluding to events of contemporary significance by naming two mythical personages, Theseus and Phlegyas (the father of Ixion). Virgil therefore implies, but then denies, contemporary relevance.³ It is this kind of protean elusiveness (most marked, perhaps, in the *Eclogues*) which makes the contemporary allusions in Virgil so difficult to pin down.⁴

The final group in Virgil's list is as follows (lines 621–4):

vendidit hic auro patriam dominumque potentem
imposuit; fixit leges pretio atque refixit;
hic thalamum invasit natae vetitosque hymenaeos:
ausi omnes immane nefas ausoque potiti.

Virgil must have particular individuals in mind: there would be little point in the Sibyl describing the crimes committed by certain men ('hic...hic') if in fact nobody was ever known to have committed those crimes. Secondly, the fact that the criminals are

¹ On the mythological aspects of the passage see L. Radermacher, *RhM* 63 (1908), 531–55; and, most recently, M. C. J. Putnam, *CQ* 40 (1990), 562–6.

² 'Eo bello servorum qui fugerant a dominis suis et arma contra rem publicam ceperant triginta fere milia capta dominis ad supplicium sumendum tradidi', Aug. *Anc.* 25.1; cf. Hor. *Epod.* 9.9–10 (quoted by Servius); Vell. 2.73.3.

³ Horace regularly uses a similar technique: see G. Williams, *The Third Book of Horace's Odes* (Oxford, 1969), p. 42 (on *Carm.* 3.3.1ff.).

⁴ For a recent and (to my mind) eminently successful attempt see A. M. Bowie, *CQ* 40 (1990), 470–81 on the death of Priam in *Aen.* 2.

not named probably implies that they are figures from recent history: elsewhere in the speech whenever Virgil has mythical characters in mind he gives their names. So to whom, at the culmination of the Sibyl's speech, is Virgil alluding?

Let us begin with lines 621–2. Servius, while allowing that Virgil's words also have a general reference, takes the poet to be recalling here two individuals. For the first ('vendidit hic auro patriam') he suggests Lasthenes (who betrayed Olynthus to Philip II of Macedon in 348) or alternatively C. Scribonius Curio, the tribune of 50 allegedly bought over by Caesar;⁵ in connection with the latter possibility he cites Lucan 4.820, 'Gallorum captus spoliis et Caesaris auro'. For the second ('fixit leges pretio atque refixit') he proposes Mark Antony. The suggestion that Virgil intends to call Curio to mind may be immediately discounted, since this would entail taking 'dominum... potentem' to be Augustus' adoptive father (cf. 'nec veriti dominorum fallere dextras' above, 613).⁶ Similarly, Lasthenes may with little hesitation be ruled out on grounds of obscurity. In fact, only one identification is required within lines 621–2: Servius has failed to appreciate that, as 'hic... hic' makes clear, the Sibyl in these two lines and the next one (i.e. 621–3) is distinguishing only two individuals, not three (this would be clearer to the modern reader if, as in some editions, the semicolon after 'imposuit' were replaced with a comma). Nevertheless, Servius seems to have hit the mark in suggesting Antony, of whom not just 'fixit leges pretio atque refixit' but also 'vendidit hic auro patriam' is an appropriate description: Virgil's picture of the man who sold his country for gold and who made and unmade laws for bribes conforms exactly to the hostile characterisation of Antony presented by Cicero in his *Philippics*. The most striking passages are worth quoting at some length, to enable the full force of the parallel to be felt (the terms also used by Virgil are italicised, although it will be seen below that Virgil is echoing Cicero, if at all, only through an intermediary).⁷

inspectantibus vobis toto Capitolio tabulae *figebantur*, neque solum singulis venibant immunitates sed etiam populis universis: civitas non iam singillatim, sed provinciis totis dabatur. ...imperium populi Romani huius domesticis nundinis deminutum est (*Phil.* 2.92).

quid ego de commentariis infinitis, quid de innumerabilibus chirographis loquar? quorum etiam institores sunt qui ea tamquam gladiatorum libellos palam venditent. itaque tanti acervi nummorum apud istum construuntur ut iam expendantur, non numerentur pecuniae. at quam caeca avaritia est! nuper *fixa* tabula est qua civitates locupletissimae Cretensium vectigalibus liberantur... omnino nemo ullius rei fuit emptor cui defuerit hic venditor (2.97).

quis autem rex umquam fuit tam insignite impudens ut haberet omnia commoda, beneficia, iura regni venalia? quam hic immunitatem, quam civitatem, quod praemium non vel singulis hominibus vel civitatibus vel universis provinciis *vendidit*? nihil humile de Tarquinio, nihil sordidum accepimus: at vero huius domi inter quasilla pendebatur *aurum*, numerabatur pecunia; una in domo omnes quorum intererat totum imperium populi Romani nundinabantur (3.10).

reliquas res ad lucrum praedamque revocaverit, *vendiderit* immunitates, civitates liberavit, provincias universas ex imperi populi Romani iure sustulerit, exsules reduxit, falsas *leges* C. Caesaris nomine et falsa decreta in aes incidenda et in Capitolio *figenda* curaverit, earumque rerum omnium domesticum mercatum instituerit, populo Romano *leges imposuerit* (3.30).

illa vero dissipatio pecuniae publicae ferenda nullo modo est per quam sestertium septiens miliens falsis perscriptionibus donationibusque avertit, ut portentis simile videatur tantam pecuniam populi Romani tam brevi tempore perire potuisse... decreta falsa *vendebat*, regna,

⁵ References at *MRR* ii. 249.

⁶ Lucan (4.819–24), on the other hand, appropriates the phraseology of Virgil and Varius fr. 1 (on which see below) when recounting Curio's mercenary betrayal of Rome to Caesar – thus ingeniously inverting the Augustanism of his models; cf. M. J. Dewar, *CQ* 38 (1988), 561–2.

⁷ Note also *Phil.* 1.23, 13.5; *Att.* 14.12.1; *Fam.* 12.1.1. A. S. Hollis (*CQ* 27 (1977), 188 n. 12) suggests that 'figere' and 'refigere' were part of a 'catchphrase' used against Antony in 44–3.

civitates, immunitates in aes accepta pecunia iubebat incidi. haec se ex commentariis C. Caesaris, quorum ipse auctor erat, agere dicebat. calebant in interiore aedium parte totius rei publicae nundinae; ... restituebantur exsules quasi *lege sine lege* (5.11).

neque solum commentariis commenticiis chirographisque venalibus innumerabilis pecunia congesta in illam domum est, cum, quae *vendebat* Antonius, ea se ex actis Caesaris agere diceret, sed senatus etiam consulta pecunia accepta falsa referebat, syngraphae obsignabantur, senatus consulta numquam facta ad aerarium deferebantur ... foedera interea facta, regna data, populi provinciaeque liberatae, illarumque rerum falsae tabulae gemente populo Romano toto Capitolio *figebantur*. quibus rebus tanta pecunia una in domo coacervata est (5.12).

senatus consulta falsa delata ab eo iudicavimus: num ea vera possumus iudicare? *leges* statuimus per vim et contra auspicia latas eisque nec populum nec plebem teneri: num eas restitui posse censetis? sestertium septiens miliens avertisse Antonium pecuniae publicae iudicavistis: num fraude poterit carere peculatus? immunitates ab eo, civitates, sacerdotia, regna venierunt: num *figentur* rursus eae tabulae quas vos decretis vestris *refixistis*? (12.12).

Under Augustus the hostile view of Antony was the one which prevailed, and it would therefore be difficult to maintain that, of Virgil's words, '*vendidit hic auro patriam*' and '*fixit leges pretio atque refixit*' would not have suggested Antony to a Roman readership.

A problem, however, is presented by the part of lines 621–2 not so far discussed (and not commented upon by Servius), '*dominumque potentem / imposuit*'. The opening sentence of the *Res Gestae* reveals that Antony's political ascendancy was seen (or at least represented) by Augustus as a '*dominatio*' ('Annos undeviginti natus exercitum privato consilio et privata impensa comparavi, per quem rem publicam a dominatione factionis oppressam in libertatem vindicavi', 1.1), and this view was shared by Cicero and others.⁸ But Virgil does not say that '*hic*' was himself a '*dominus*': he says that he inflicted a '*dominus*' (someone, presumably, other than himself) on his country. Are we then to reject the identification of '*hic*' with Antony? Two factors prevent us from doing so, by confirming Antony as the criminal of lines 621–2.⁹ First, Macrobius (6.1.39) reports that these lines are modelled on the following lines from Varius, *de Morte* (fr. 1 Buechner):

*vendidit hic Latium populis agrosque Quiritum
eripuit, fixit leges pretio atque refixit.*

Although the old view that the *de Morte* was an epic on the death of Caesar can no longer be accepted, the allusion to Antony in Varius frs. 1–2 nevertheless seems definite.¹⁰ Secondly, in his allegorical description at *Georgics* 3.37–9 of the poem he intends to write (and which later took shape as the *Aeneid*) Virgil indicates that he will depict '*Invidia infelix*' exposed to the torments of Tartarus:

*Invidia infelix Furias amnemque severum
Cocyti metuet tortosque Ixionis anguis
immanemque rotam et non exsuperabile saxum.*

Conington's suggestion that by '*Invidia*' we are to understand Octavian's political opponents (rather than Virgil's poetic rivals) has won general acceptance.¹¹ It seems, therefore, that what Virgil has done is to suggest Antony at '*vendidit hic auro patriam*' (alert readers would recall Varius, '*vendidit hic*'), then to steer away from

⁸ Cf. Cic. *Phil.* 2.35, 3.8–12, 3.29, 3.34, 5.17; 'M. Antonius consul cum impotenter dominaretur', Liv. *Per.* 117; 'torpebat oppressa dominatione Antonii civitas', Vell. 2.61.1.

⁹ See E. Norden on *Aen.* 6.621f. (p. 292).

¹⁰ See A. Rostagni, *RFIC* 87 (1959), 380–1; A. S. Hollis, *CQ* 27 (1977), 187–90. Fr. 2 reads: 'incubet ut Tyriis atque ex solido bibat auro'.

¹¹ See J. Conington *ad loc.* and on *Aen.* 8.667. R. A. B. Mynors (*ad loc.*) presents the case clearly.

the contemporary reference with 'dominumque potentem / imposuit',¹² and finally to return more decisively to Antony with the exact quotation of Varius, 'fixit leges pretio atque refixit'. There is something teasing (perhaps even flirtatious) in Virgil's manner of making a suggestion, denying that he has made it and then repeating it. It is in fact an extension of the technique which was identified above and termed 'protean elusiveness'.

The first 'hic', then, is accounted for: we may take him to be Antony. But can the second be identified, 'hic thalamum invasit natae vetitosque hymenaeos' (623)? Servius makes two suggestions, Thyestes and Cinyras, both mythical. This cannot be correct, at least in the case of Cinyras: as E. Norden has pointed out, Cinyras sinned unwittingly, whereas Virgil makes it clear (in line 624) that the crime was premeditated.¹³ Servius goes on to cite and reject the view of Donatus that the man in question is (of all people) Cicero. This theory has in modern times been taken up by F. Olivier,¹⁴ who argues that Virgil is echoing the anti-Ciceronian invective known to us from the pseudo-Sallustian *oratio in Ciceronem* and the speech given to Q. Fufius Calenus in Dio.¹⁵ But the objections to this are instantly fatal. First, Cicero did not marry Tullia, and not even in the invectives is it claimed that he did. Secondly, an allusion to Cicero would be an intolerably anticlimactic conclusion to Virgil's list of criminals. Someone is needed who was at least as reprehensible as Antony; Cicero, who was hailed as the father of his country, would therefore be an inappropriate choice. Thirdly, the evidence is that Augustus did not himself hold such a negative view of Cicero.¹⁶

So who, finally, is the arch-villain who forms the climax of Virgil's description of the criminals in Tartarus? He has never been unmasked,¹⁷ although the key to his identity lies in fact elsewhere within the poem. Among the scenes depicted on the shield of Aeneas in Book 8 is a representation of Tartarus and the punishment of one particular criminal, whom the poet addresses by name (8.666–9):

hinc procul addit
Tartareas etiam sedes, alta ostia Ditis,
et scelerum poenas, et te, Catilina, minaci
pendentem scopulo Furiarumque ora trementem.

It is, I contend, not Cicero but his celebrated enemy L. Sergius Catilina¹⁸ to whom Virgil alludes at 6.623, 'hic thalamum invasit natae vetitosque hymenaeos'. The evidence for Catiline's incestuous marriage to his own daughter occurs in Cicero's *in*

¹² In G. Williams' terms (n. 3 above) these words would be a 'poetical red-herring'.

¹³ See E. Norden on *Aen.* 6.623. Norden is mistaken in claiming that Thyestes' crime was also unintentional; cf. Apollod. *Epit.* 2.14; Hyg. *Fab.* 87–8. Thyestes would therefore remain a possibility; but it is argued above that Virgil is not likely to be thinking of mythical characters at this point.

¹⁴ *Essais* (Univ. de Lausanne Publ. de la Fac. des Lettres 15; 1963), pp. 205–10. G. Highet, *The Speeches in Vergil's Aeneid* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 142–4 hesitantly agrees.

¹⁵ See 'verum, ut opinor, splendor domesticus tibi animos tollit, uxor sacrilega ac periuriis delibuta, filia matris paelex, tibi iucundior atque obsequentior quam parenti par est', [Sal.] *Cic.* 2; *τοσαύτη ἀσελγεία καὶ ἀκαθαρσία παρὰ πάντα τὸν βίον χρώμενος ὥστε μηδὲ τῶν συγγενεστᾶτων ἀπέχεσθαι, ἀλλὰ τὴν τε γυναῖκα προαγωγέειν καὶ τὴν θυγατέρα μοιχεύειν*, Dio 46.18.6. Donatus was perhaps led to think of Cicero by the first of these passages.

¹⁶ See Plut. *Cic.* 49.3 (λόγιος ἄνθρωπος ὦ παῖ, λόγιος καὶ φιλόπατρις).

¹⁷ R. G. Austin (on *Aen.* 6.623) remarks, 'Obviously here no identifiable allusiveness could be latent'.

¹⁸ K. W. Gransden's assertion (on *Aen.* 8.666–70) that Catiline was 'put to death, despite Julius Caesar's plea for clemency' needs to be corrected. This invalidates his contention that Virgil is here intending to criticise Caesar and perhaps to warn Augustus.

Toga Candida of 64 B.C. (ap. Asc. 91.24–6 C): ‘Cum deprehendebare in adulteriis, cum deprehendebas adulteros ipse, cum ex eodem stupro tibi et uxorem et filiam invenisti’. Asconius fills out the picture, and mentions that the charge of marrying his daughter was likewise made against Catiline by L. Lucceius, who prosecuted him unsuccessfully under the *lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis* later in 64:¹⁹ ‘Dicitur Catilina adulterium commisisse cum ea quae ei postea socrus fuit, et ex eo natam stupro duxisse uxorem, cum filia eius esset. Hoc Lucceius quoque Catilinae obicit in orationibus quas in eum scripsit. Nomina harum mulierum nondum inveni’ (91.27–92.3 C). Plutarch also touches upon Catiline’s incest with his daughter, although not however his marriage to her (*Λεύκιον Κατιλίαν, ὃς αἰτίαν ποτὲ πρὸς ἄλλοις ἀδικήμασι μεγάλοις ἔλαβε παρθένῳ συγγεγονέναι θυγατρὶ*, *Cic.* 10.2).²⁰ The lady in question, alleged to be Catiline’s daughter, was evidently his last wife Aurelia Orestilla, ‘quoius praeter formam nihil umquam bonus laudavit’ (Sal. *Cat.* 15.2).²¹ The identity of Orestilla’s mother, Catiline’s alleged partner in adultery, was unknown to Asconius and is beyond recovery.

It is now clear that the last two individuals to whom Virgil makes the Sibyl allude in her description of Tartarus are to be identified as Antony and Catiline. Catiline is named once in the *Aeneid*, in the lines from Book 8 quoted above. Antony too is named only once, in lines which follow shortly after the mention of Catiline (8.685–8):

hinc ope barbarica variisque Antonius armis,
victor ab Aurorae populis et litore rubro,
Aegyptum virisque Orientis et ultima secum
Bactra vehit, sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx.

Cicero in his *Philippics* set out to denigrate Antony by comparing him with Catiline, who in Cicero’s eyes had plotted no less than the destruction of his country.²² It was no doubt pleasing to Augustus that Virgil should have adopted precisely the same technique.²³

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¹⁹ See M. C. Alexander, *TLRR* no. 217.

²⁰ Catullus, in his denunciation of modern corruption (64.397–406), talks of a father wishing for his son’s death, so that he may enjoy a new bride without hindrance (401–2), and of a mother knowingly committing incest with her son (403–4). While these crimes are intended to be taken primarily in a general sense, K. Quinn (on 402) has plausibly suspected a latent allusion to Catiline (cf. Sal. *Cat.* 15.2; V. Max. 9.1.9; App. *BC* 2.2).

²¹ Thus R. Syme, *Sallust* (Berkeley etc., 1964), p. 85; cf. M. T. Griffin, *JRS* 63 (1973), 201 n. 50. On the date of their marriage see B. A. Marshall, *RFIC* 105 (1977), 151–4.

²² *Phil.* 2.1, 2.118, 4.15, 8.15, 13.22.

²³ I am indebted to the Editors for comments.